

Take Lead!

Engaged leaders hold themselves and their Soldiers to a high standard both on and off duty. They guide their subordinates and enable them to manage risk and prevent needless loss. Our Army breeds this type of leader and they make us "Army Strong." You won't find these leaders or their Soldiers in the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center's accident database. Unfortunately, however, there's a small minority of leaders that don't fit the definition of "engaged leader." Let's learn from the mistakes made by the leaders in the following examples and keep the accident arrow turned down.

In our first accident, a Soldier was killed while moving an M2HB .50-caliber machine gun as part of a detail. The NCO in charge of clearing the gun after completion of firing failed to follow the procedure outlined in the technical manual. Although the company commander directed that either the platoon sergeant or platoon leader physically clear their platoon's M2s, neither cleared the weapon involved in the accident. At least two other leaders might have prevented this accident had they directed someone to clear the weapon under their charge.

In another accident, a staff sergeant was in charge of a cadre training event. This NCO instructed the other cadre members to wear the required personal protective equipment while operating watercraft, which is a known and written standard. After reinforcing this directive several times, the NCO totally disregarded his own instruction by not donning the appropriate PPE or properly checking specific equipment on the boat, which subsequently capsized. The NCO drowned.

Sometimes, officers also fail to meet the standard of an engaged leader. One captain, a company commander, often conducted safety briefings and cautioned his Soldiers about the hazards of drinking and driving. He also counseled his Soldiers who rode motorcycles on the Army requirements relating to mandatory training and protective equipment. Tragically, he failed to heed his own advice.

One night, the captain and his wife left their home to enjoy some time together on their new motorcycle. They stopped at a local bar, where the captain met with some friends and started drinking. Leaving his wife at the first bar, the captain got on the motorcycle without his helmet and followed a friend to another bar. After two more hours of drinking, he left his buddies to pick up his wife.

Traveling at a high rate of speed and still not wearing a helmet, he crossed a set of railroad tracks that sent the bike flying more than 60 feet through the air. After striking the ground, the motorcycle flipped 12 to 14 times before crashing into a fence. The captain was dead within the hour. Post-mortem toxicology tests indicated the captain's blood alcohol level was .28, more than three times the legal limit. A truly engaged leader won't allow themselves to fall into this kind of trap.

How do we prevent accidents such as these? The solution might be as simple as leaders being in the right place at the right time, knowing their Soldiers, enforcing standards and making informed decisions at the appropriate level. Taken together, these attributes are an excellent example of engaged and accountable leadership. We understand there are disciplined leaders throughout the Army who don't and won't fall prey to these types of accidents. So stay engaged, hold yourself accountable to the same standard you expect from your Soldiers and continue Leading on the Edge!